Quick Facts
RESEARCH BRIEFS ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE
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A Fresh Look at the API Score and Statewide Rank

As part of California's annual Academic Performance Index (API) reporting, each public school receives a statewide rank along with its base score. Both of these measures, the rank and the score, are a significant and useful means by which education policy leaders, the media, and the general public can and do draw conclusions about the academic performance of California's schools. While the API score, more so than the rank, can be used to look at change over time, this research brief describes a way to use the rank information to assess changes in school performance.

The API is a numeric index that ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. A school's score or placement on the API is an indicator of the school's performance level. The statewide rank is a number from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), indicating in which *decile* the school performed. Ten percent of all elementary, middle, and high schools fall in each decile. Since the statewide rank is a relative rank of scores at a particular point in time, it is not necessarily a good measure of the gains that schools have made since they received their first APIs in 1999.

Figure 1. DISTRIBUTION of DECILE RANKS
1999 API Scores (Stanford-9 only) compared to Fixed Norms from 1999

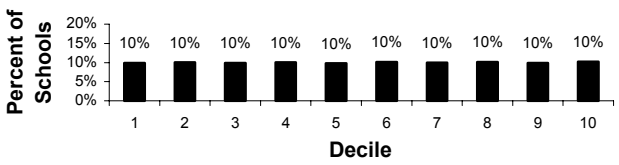


Figure 2. DISTRIBUTION of DECILE RANKS
2000 API Scores (Stanford-9 only) compared to Fixed Norms from 1999

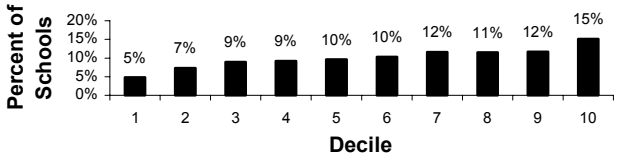
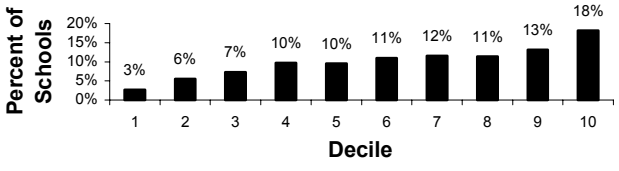


Figure 3. DISTRIBUTION of DECILE RANKS
2001 API Scores (Stanford-9 only) compared to Fixed Norms from 1999



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Prepared by the Research and Analysis Unit
Policy and Evaluation Division
California Department of Education

For more information: research@cde.ca.gov
(916) 651-8637

For example, if statewide scores are increasing, a school that achieves significant improvement might show no change at all in its statewide rank. Such a school might even experience "decline" in its statewide rank if the average improvement in California's schools as a whole was equal or greater than that of the school in question. This example is the reality for many of the state's improving schools.

The comparison of changes in the actual API scores over time, both for a specific school and in the aggregate, is a better method for measuring progress in academic performance than comparing ranks. Evaluating trends in this way for the state as a whole reveals that there are positive gains in academic performance that are very encouraging. The rise in API scores over the last two years has been documented elsewhere (for example, see the news release at <www.cde.ca.gov/news/releases2001/rel50.asp>), and leads naturally to the question,

What would be the distribution of statewide ranks if the initial cut points from 1999 were held fixed?

Many schools in the lowest deciles have shown dramatic gains over the last two years. The statewide rank of such schools, by contrast, often remains a consistent 1 or 2 because most schools in the state have made gains. Another way to see the gains that schools have made since the inception of the API is presented in the preceding charts.

For the 1999 Base API, the statewide ranks were determined from a table of cut points. When these cut points are applied to the 1999 scores, the resulting distribution is uniform, with 10% of all schools in each decile (Figure 1). However, when these same cut points are applied to the 2000 or 2001 API scores, it becomes clear that far fewer schools are scoring at what was the initial "Decile 1" level (Figures 2 and 3). By contrast, many more schools are scoring at what was the initial "Decile 10" level (over 18% of all schools surpassed this threshold in 2001). And other conclusions are certainly possible from these data. For example, over 65% of schools are scoring at levels that initially represented the top half of the state. Or, approximately 900 schools that were in Deciles 1 or 2 in 2001 have API scores that would have placed them in Deciles 3 or 4 in 1999.

These findings represent good news for both policy makers and families with an expectation that efforts to improve California's student performance should show results. They also serve as a reminder of the need for additional analysis and interpretation regarding the significance of data, including API "scores" and "ranks" so that they may be fully and properly understood in a meaningful context.